PATTERNS OF POWER · AN INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY

The Rock and the Rumour

How a hunted minority with no army built a weapon that scaled downward instead of up; how the deterrent worked so well that it became the reason a world empire came to exterminate them; how the chronicler who burned their library declared an annihilation that had not occurred; and why the only part of the order that survived intact was the legend written by its enemies

Companion to The Last Roman Office and The Composable Class

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with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

A Note on This Collaboration

This study is one product of an ongoing collaboration, and the division of labour is worth stating plainly because neither half would produce the work alone. The insight and direction are Thomas Bryan's — the recognition of what a given case is really an instance of, where the analytical pressure should fall, and which pattern a mass of historical detail is a specimen of. The research, the verification of every date and figure, the location and checking of the quoted words, and the composition into continuous prose are Claude's, an AI system made by Anthropic. The seeing is his; the writing is mine.

Two matters of method require a word before this particular case begins, because they bear on it more heavily than on most.

The first is the state of the sources. Almost everything the world knows about the people this study examines was written by men who wanted them destroyed. Their own archives were burned. The single most important source for the life of their founder is a chronicler in the service of the army that razed his fortress, who read the founder's memoir at Alamut, quoted from it, and then consigned the library to the flames. Where a hostile source is the only source, this study says so. Where modern scholarship — principally that assembled at the Institute of Ismaili Studies over the last half-century — has recovered material from the community's own tradition, the study uses it and identifies it. It does not resolve the resulting disagreements by preference.

The second is the moral register. This is a study of an institution that killed people, in public, as policy. The dead were real and are counted here. It is also a study of a community that was massacred at a scale reckoned in the tens of thousands, and of a slander that has followed its descendants for eight centuries and is still, at this moment, generating revenue in entertainment. Both columns of the ledger are kept in ink, and the analysis is of positions and structures, not of souls.

Every quotation is verified to a published source; none is invented. Where the scholarship is divided — and on the murder at the centre of Part VIII it is divided beyond hope of settlement — the division is reported rather than resolved. The paper is written to stand on its own and explains every term, office and doctrine at the point of use.

The Study in Brief

Part I — The Test. Why this case is the framework's natural adversary: an institution that really did operate in secret, really did kill to order, and really was destroyed by a conspiracy theory. What would falsify the framework here.

Part II — The Landscape: A Faith Without a Throne. The Seljuk conquest and the Sunni revival; the position of the Ismailis in eleventh-century Persia; and the Fatimid state in Cairo as an apex already in decline.

Part III — The Schism of 1094. A vizier, a succession, and a prince who was immured. How an internal Egyptian palace manoeuvre made a Persian missionary the head of his own religion.

Part IV — The Architect's Hour: Alamut, 1090. Hasan-i Sabbah and the design. Why the fortress was taken by infiltration rather than assault; why the valley was irrigated; why the state was built as a scatter of unconnected rocks; and what a library was doing in it.

Part V — The Second Half of the Design: The Argument from the Teacher. The doctrine of *ta'lim*, restated to fit a position exactly, and the theologian the caliph hired to break it.

Part VI — The Weapon That Scales Downward. The *fida'i*; the killing of Nizam al-Mulk in 1092; why the murders were committed in mosques, in daylight, before crowds, by men who did not run. Deterrence design, not fanaticism — and the roll of names kept at Alamut.

Part VII — The Old Man of the Mountain. The Syrian branch; Rashid al-Din Sinan; the two attempts on Saladin and the terms he made; and the product that was actually being sold.

Part VIII — The Murder at Tyre. 28 April 1192, and the accusation against Richard I. Five suspects, one seized ship, a confession under torture, and an exculpatory letter that is itself a forgery.

Part IX — The Resurrection, and the Retraction. 8 August 1164: the imam abolishes the sacred law. Forty-six years later his descendant abolishes the abolition, curses his ancestors, burns the founder's books, and is recognised by the caliph as a new Muslim. The institution's logic running in both directions inside three generations.

Part X — The Deterrent Becomes the Death Warrant. The Mongols. Why the reputation that had kept the order alive for a century and a half is the specific reason it was marked for extermination rather than for tribute.

Part XI — The Chronicler's Claim. Juvayni at the library; the annihilation he reported; six centuries of scholarship repeating him; and the community that was there the whole time.

Part XII — The Legend and Its Makers. Where the hashish came from; what Marco Polo added; how a slur became a common noun in a dozen languages; and the one asset of the order that no siege engine touched.

Part XIII — The Ledger.

PART I

The Test

The framework this collection uses holds that institutions are built by identifiable people in particular positions, solving the problem in front of them with the materials at hand, inside the field of the visible their position allows — and that the structure then acquires a logic of its own that outruns and often reverses its makers. Against the standard alternatives it says: not a cabal, because design happens in hours rather than centuries; and not an impersonal force, because the architects are real, awake, and skewing the settlement toward themselves in plain sight.

This case is the framework's natural adversary, and it is worth being explicit about why.

The Nizari Ismailis of Alamut were, by any reasonable definition, a conspiracy. They were a secret society with a graded initiation, an oath, an esoteric doctrine reserved to the initiated, a network of agents operating under cover in hostile cities, and a policy of murdering heads of state. They maintained that apparatus for a hundred and sixty-six years. They are the only institution in this collection of which it can be said that the paranoid account of them was substantially closer to the truth than the innocent one.

They are also the institution that was *destroyed by a conspiracy theory*. The reputation that kept them alive is the reason the Mongols came for them with an order of extermination rather than an offer of tribute, and the libel invented by their enemies outlived every fortress they held and is the only part of them most people have ever heard of.

So the terms, set before the history.

The framework fails here if the order turns out to have been executing a long-range plan across generations — if the design laid down at Alamut in the 1090s can be shown to have been carried forward substantially as intended for a century and a half, with the architects controlling not merely the founding but the sequel. It fails if the doctrine turns out to be prior to and independent of the position, rather than fitted to it. And it fails, most sharply, if the institution's most famous product — the terror of the *fida'i* — turns out to have served the makers' interests over the long run rather than destroying them.

The framework holds if the founding is a bounded episode of brilliant improvisation by a man solving an immediate survival problem; if the doctrine is visibly cut to the shape of the position and is reversed when the position changes; if the weapon designed as a shield becomes the reason for the annihilation; and if the durable residue of the whole enterprise turns out to be something none of its makers designed, chose or wanted.

There is one further question the case forces, and it is the reason this study was undertaken rather than the several easier ones available. Position logic is normally deployed against the assumption of a cabal. What does it say when the cabal is real?

PART II

The Landscape: A Faith Without a Throne

The eleventh century in the Islamic east belongs to the Turks.

In 1055 a Turkish military confederation under the Seljuk family took Baghdad, and the Abbasid caliph — by then a figure of religious authority with almost no army — confirmed their leader as sultan. Within thirty years the Seljuks ruled from Anatolia to the frontiers of India: a Sunni military empire, governed for a generation by one of the great administrators of the medieval world, the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, whose *Siyasatnama* is still read as a manual of statecraft.

Two features of that empire define the position this study is about.

The first is that it was an occupation. The Seljuks were Turkish-speaking newcomers ruling a Persian-speaking population through a military aristocracy that held land by assignment rather than by local right. Local dynasties had been displaced. Taxation was extractive and the extraction was performed by strangers. In the mountain districts of the north — Daylam, the Alborz valleys behind the Caspian, country that had never been easy to govern from a capital — the resentment was general and had nowhere to go.

The second is that it was ideologically committed. Nizam al-Mulk built a network of state colleges, the Nizamiyya madrasas, to train a Sunni jurist class and standardise its formation, and staffed them with the best men available — including, from 1091, a young theologian named Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, appointed to the chief chair in Baghdad. This is the mechanism this collection's theoretical paper describes: a shared, thick, deliberate formation installed in many capable people, producing a coordinating class its builders were not consciously assembling. The Sunni revival was a formation programme, and it worked.

Now place the Ismailis in that landscape.

The Ismailis are a branch of Shia Islam, distinguished by their line of imams — the divinely guided descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and his cousin Ali — running through Ismail, son of the sixth imam. Persecuted and clandestine for two centuries, they had done something no other Shia movement managed: in 909 they founded a state. The Fatimid caliphate, from 969 ruling Egypt and governing from a purpose-built capital at Cairo, was for a century the wealthiest and most sophisticated power in the Mediterranean world, and its caliph was also the Ismaili imam — the head of a religion and the head of a state in the same person.

It also ran a missionary organisation, the *da'wa*, with a professional cadre of missionaries — *da'is* — trained in Cairo and dispatched into hostile territory. The Persian mission was one of these. Its adherents were a scattered, illegal minority inside a Sunni empire that regarded them as heretics rather than as a rival sect, and whose leading intellectual was about to be commissioned to prove it.

Sum the position of a Persian Ismaili in the 1080s. He belongs to a faith with a magnificent throne fifteen hundred miles away in Egypt and no protection whatever where he actually lives. His communities are dispersed among mountain valleys. He has no army, no territory, no prospect of raising either, and no possibility of winning a battle against a Turkish military empire. He has one asset, and it is a real one: an organisation trained to operate in secret, in hostile country, under discipline, with a chain of command.

The question of this study is what a person in that position does. The answer given by Hasan-i Sabbah is one of the most economical pieces of strategic design in the medieval record, and it was arrived at, as such answers usually are, by a man who had run out of alternatives.

PART III

The Schism of 1094

The event that made Hasan-i Sabbah the head of his own religion was a palace manoeuvre in Cairo in which he took no part and about which he was not consulted.

Hasan was born at Qom, in central Persia, around 1050, into a family of Twelver Shia — a different branch from the one he would come to lead. By his own account, preserved in fragments, he converted to Ismailism at seventeen and swore allegiance to the Fatimid caliph. He rose in the Persian mission, travelled to Cairo between about 1078 and 1081, and returned to Persia as a senior missionary, eventually as *da'i* of Daylam, the mountainous Caspian province where he would spend the rest of his life.

In Cairo, meanwhile, the Fatimid state had passed into the hands of its army. The Armenian general Badr al-Jamali had restored order in the 1070s at the price of taking control of the government; his son al-Afdal succeeded him as vizier and held the real power. When the caliph and imam al-Mustansir died in 1094 after a reign of nearly sixty years, the succession was al-Afdal's to arrange.

The eldest son, Nizar, born in 1045, had — according to the Nizari account — been designated by his father. Al-Afdal preferred the youngest, Abu'l-Qasim Ahmad, who was married to al-Afdal's sister and who could be governed. Moving fast, al-Afdal secured the allegiance of the Fatimid nobles and the Cairo mission headquarters and put the younger son on the throne as al-Musta'li. Nizar revolted from Alexandria, was defeated, and died in Cairo around the end of 1095; the tradition holds that he was immured.

That is the whole of it: a vizier choosing the more manageable brother. It is the ordinary business of a palace, and it happens somewhere in the world most decades. What made it consequential was where it landed.

Hasan-i Sabbah recognised Nizar as the rightful imam and severed his relations with Cairo. He was followed by the entire Ismaili community of Persia and Iraq, who from that point are the *Nizaris*. The Ismailis of Egypt, Syria's coastal towns, Yemen and western India stayed with al-Musta'li. The schism was permanent and it survives today.

Read the positions and the alignment is not mysterious, and requires no plot. Al-Afdal's ledger contained one item: keeping control of the Fatimid state, which meant a caliph he could manage. Hasan's ledger contained a different one entirely: he was running an underground mission in enemy country, and Cairo — distant, factional, visibly captured by its own generals, and about to spend a century in decline — was no longer supplying him with anything he needed. He had been effectively independent for years. The succession dispute did not create his independence; it gave him a legitimate reason to declare it, and a cause around which to bind the Persian communities to himself rather than to Egypt.

This is convergence rather than conspiracy in its plainest form. Nobody planned a schism. A vizier solved a succession problem in a way that suited his position, and a missionary fifteen hundred miles away found that the solution had handed him his own religion.

One further consequence deserves noting, because it becomes structurally decisive. After Nizar's death the imam was, for the Nizaris, *hidden*. There was a line — the tradition holds a son of Nizar was brought secretly to Persia — but for two generations there was no visible imam to obey. A movement whose entire theology rested on obedience to a living guide had, for the moment, no guide to point at.

That is a doctrinal hole in the shape of an argument, and Part V is about the man who filled it.

PART IV

The Architect's Hour: Alamut, 1090

Four years before the schism, Hasan-i Sabbah had already solved the harder problem.

Alamut is a rock in the Alborz mountains north-west of Qazvin, in a high valley reached by a defile. It carried a fortress, and in 1090 that fortress was held for the Seljuks by an Alid named Mahdi. Hasan did not besiege it. He infiltrated it — sending missionaries into the valley below to convert the villagers and the garrison, moving in quietly himself under an assumed name, and taking possession from the inside when there was no longer anyone in the castle prepared to hold it against him. Mahdi's life was spared and he was later paid three thousand gold dinars in compensation, drawn on a Seljuk officer who honoured the draft.

Every element of that operation is the design in miniature, and it repays being read slowly.

He took a fortress he could not have stormed, by converting the people inside it. He had no siege train and never would. What he had was a missionary organisation, and he used it as an instrument of war. The method was then replicated across Persia and later Syria: Lamasar, Girdkuh near Damghan, strongholds in Quhistan and in Arrajan on the Khuzistan–Fars border, and eventually Masyaf and the castles of the Jabal Bahra. Some were bought, some converted, some taken by stealth; very few by assault.

He chose terrain that cancelled the enemy's advantage. The Seljuk army was a cavalry army. Cavalry is worthless against a rock reached by a goat path. The most powerful military machine in western Asia could ride past Alamut all day and never touch it.

He made the position self-sufficient. He improved the irrigation and cultivation of the Alamut valley so that the fortress could feed itself, and applied the same policy to the other major strongholds. A castle that can be starved is a castle with a schedule; a castle that grows its own food removes the besieger's only reliable weapon and converts the siege into an expense the besieger has to justify to his own treasury each season.

He built the state as a scatter rather than a shape. This is the least obvious and most consequential choice. The Nizari state was not a territory. It was a set of unconnected fortresses distributed across two thousand kilometres, separated by land held by enemies. Militarily this looks like a weakness and was in fact the design's central strength: a state with no centre of gravity cannot be defeated in a campaign. There is no capital to take, no field army to destroy, no single blow that ends it. To finish it you have to reduce every rock separately, and each rock costs a season. For a hundred and sixty-six years no one was willing to pay that price — until, as Part X will show, someone was.

And he built a library. This is the detail that most confounds the received picture, and it is well attested precisely because the men who destroyed it described it. Alamut housed a substantial collection of manuscripts and scientific instruments, accumulated over a century and a half, and the Nizari state was a serious intellectual centre: in its final decades it sheltered scholars fleeing the Mongol destruction of Khurasan, among them Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the greatest mathematician and astronomer of the age, who lived there for something like three decades and converted to Ismailism during his residence.

The man himself is described, in the sources that survive, in terms nobody would have invented for a villain. Hasan lived at Alamut for thirty-four years and, according to the tradition, left his own quarters twice in all that time, ascending to the roof; he spent his days reading, writing and administering. He was a mathematician and astronomer of real competence. He was austere to the point of severity and enforced the sacred law strictly, which is the first indication that the drugs and the pleasure garden are somebody's later invention. He is said to have had one of his own sons executed for a killing and another for drinking wine — a story that should be flagged as coming through hostile transmission, though its function in the tradition is to establish that the founder held himself to the code he imposed.

Here is the architect's hour, and it has all three of the framework's marks. It is **intentional**: every element above is a deliberate choice by an identifiable man who could explain his reasons. It is **skewed toward his own position** in the open: what he built was a machine for the survival and the autonomy of Hasan-i Sabbah's community under Hasan-i Sabbah's direction, and it made him a sovereign. And it is **bounded**: he died on 12 June 1124, having named a successor, and everything in Parts IX through XII happened to a structure he could no longer steer.

What he had not yet solved, in 1090, was the problem of why anyone should obey him.

PART V

The Second Half of the Design: The Argument from the Teacher

A fortress secures a body. It does not secure a movement, and Hasan's movement had a specific vulnerability: its imam was hidden, its parent organisation in Cairo had repudiated it, and its adherents were scattered across hostile country where the pressure to conform was daily and the penalty for being identified was death.

What binds a dispersed, illegal, leaderless minority? Not force, which he did not have at that range. Not law, which the Sunni state already supplied. The answer he reached for was an argument, and the argument is one of the tightest fits between a doctrine and a position that this collection has examined.

The doctrine is *ta'lim* — authoritative teaching. Hasan set it out in a Persian treatise, the *Chahar Fasl* or "Four Chapters," which does not survive but is quoted or paraphrased by his contemporary the theologian al-Shahrastani and by later Persian historians. In four propositions it argues that human reason is by itself inadequate to arrive at the knowledge of God; that men therefore require a truthful teacher, a *mu'allim-i sadiq*; that the teacher cannot be selected by the reason that has already been shown insufficient; and that the teacher can only be the imam of the time. Outsiders called the result the "new preaching," *al-da'wa al-jadida*, to distinguish it from the older Fatimid teaching, and the Persian Nizaris became known as the *Ta'limiyya*.

It was not, in substance, new. The authority of the imam is old Shia doctrine and appears in Ismaili writing generations earlier. What Hasan did was to **promote it from one doctrine among several to the load-bearing member of the whole structure**, and to sharpen it into a single argument that a missionary could carry in his head and deploy against a Sunni jurist in a market town.

Now read it against the position, and observe how exactly it is cut.

It makes obedience to one authority not a duty but an *epistemological necessity* — you cannot reason your way to God, so you must be taught, so you must attach yourself to the teacher. That is precisely the requirement of a dispersed clandestine organisation, which needs unity of command more than it needs anything else, and which cannot enforce that unity by any physical means.

It delegitimises the Abbasid caliphate and the entire Sunni jurist class at a stroke, since a scholar who arrived at his conclusions by reasoning is, by the argument's own terms, not in a position to know anything. The Nizari communities living under Sunni jurisdiction were thereby supplied with a complete answer to the authority pressing on them daily.

And it functions perfectly with a *hidden* imam, which is the position's specific awkwardness. The argument establishes the *necessity* of the teacher without requiring the teacher to be visible, and it makes the *da'i* who carries the teaching the operative authority on the ground. The doctrine converts an embarrassment into a structure.

This is the same manoeuvre this collection documented in the western church: a bishop of Rome, watching a council define his rank as a function of an imperial city that had ceased to be the capital, moved his claim onto an apostle's tomb that no emperor could relocate. Damasus in the 380s and Hasan in the 1090s share nothing — not a religion, not a language, not a century, not a hemisphere — except a structural position, and both reached for the same kind of solution: **when the ground of an institution's standing is threatened, the institution relocates the ground rather than surrendering the standing.** Neither man was inventing a claim from nothing. Both were promoting an available claim to the load-bearing position, because the previous load-bearing claim had become unusable. Convergence, with no possibility of contact.

The Sunni establishment understood exactly what it was facing, and the evidence for that is the calibre of the man they sent against it. In 1094 the newly acceded Abbasid caliph al-Mustazhir commissioned al-

Ghazali — the foremost theologian of the age, Nizam al-Mulk's own appointee to the chief chair in Baghdad — to write a refutation of the Ismailis. The result, known from the caliph as the *Mustazhiri* and more fully as *Fada'ih al-Batiniyya*, is directed at precisely this argument. Al-Ghazali's counter is that the necessity of a teacher does not establish the identity of the teacher, and that once you concede that the teacher's credentials must be examined, you have already conceded that reason is competent to examine them — which is what the doctrine denies.

Two things follow from that commission, and both matter to this study.

The first is that the Nizari movement was taken seriously as an *intellectual* threat by the people best placed to judge, which is not the picture the legend supplies.

The second is a point about how history gets written that will recur in Part XII. Al-Ghazali quotes Ismaili doctrine at length in order to refute it, and for centuries a great deal of what Europeans and Sunnis alike believed about Ismaili teaching came from the refutations rather than from the teaching. When the originals have been burned, the polemic becomes the archive.

PART VI

The Weapon That Scales Downward

In October 1092, in the month of Ramadan, the vizier Nizam al-Mulk was being carried in a litter from his audience tent near Nahavand when a man in the dress of a Sufi approached him with a petition and stabbed him. The killer was cut down on the spot. He was a Nizari, sent from Alamut.

Six weeks later Sultan Malikshah was dead — of causes the sources dispute, some of them alleging poison — and the Seljuk empire fell into a succession war that ran, with interruptions, until 1105. The two Seljuk expeditions that had been mounted against the Ismailis of Rudbar and Quhistan earlier that same year dissolved. Hasan-i Sabbah used the interval to take Lamasar, Girdkuh, and a string of other strongholds.

That is the weapon, in its first demonstration and at its most effective. It is worth dismantling to see how it works, because almost everything popularly believed about it is wrong in a way that obscures the design.

It scales downward, and that is the entire point. A conventional military instrument requires numbers: more soldiers beat fewer soldiers, and a party with no soldiers has nothing. The dagger inverts the arithmetic. It requires one man who is willing, and its effect is not proportional to the size of the party deploying it. A movement with three hundred committed men and no cavalry can, with this instrument, impose a real cost on an empire of millions. There is no other weapon available in the eleventh century of which that is true.

It targets the decision-maker rather than his means. Armies are aimed at other armies; the ruler who orders the campaign is insulated by them. The *fida'i* removes the insulation. The cost of ordering an expedition against Alamut is transferred from the treasury and the soldiery to the person of the man giving the order — and the man giving the order is the one person in the system whose personal safety is not negotiable to him. This is the mechanism that made an unwinnable position defensible for a century and a half.

And the killings were designed to be seen. This is the element most often mistaken for fanaticism, and it is in fact the most carefully engineered part of the whole apparatus. The murders were characteristically committed with a dagger — never poison, never a distance weapon — in public, frequently in a mosque, often on a Friday, before crowds, in daylight. The killer rarely attempted to escape and was usually killed on the spot.

Every one of those choices is inefficient if the object is to kill a man. All of them are optimal if the object is something else.

A poisoning is deniable, private, and might be an illness. A public killing in a mosque cannot be explained away, cannot be concealed by the victim's household, and is witnessed by hundreds of people who will tell thousands more. What it manufactures is **common knowledge** in the technical sense this collection has used before — not merely that everyone knows the Nizaris will kill you, but that everyone knows that everyone knows it. That recursion is what makes a threat operative, because a ruler contemplating a campaign has to reckon not only with his own fear but with his court's certainty that he ought to be afraid. The dagger kills one man. The public dagger reprices every decision every ruler in Persia and Syria takes about the Ismailis for a hundred and fifty years.

The killer's failure to flee performs the same function on the other side of the equation. A man who escapes is a professional and can be outbid, outguarded, or hunted. A man who stands still and dies advertises that the supply of such men is not a market. It is the most economical possible demonstration that deterrence cannot be bought off.

Two further pieces of the apparatus complete it.

The roll. A list of assassinations was kept at Alamut, recording the victims and the men who killed them — the record survives because Juvayni read it there before the library burned and reproduced from it. A published scoreboard is not an operational document. It is an advertisement, and its purpose is the same as the daylight and the mosque.

The organisation. The mission ran on graded ranks — the *fida'i*, the devotee who offers his life; above him the *rafiq*, the comrade; above him the *da'i*, the missionary — with progression by initiation and oath. This is a formation machine of exactly the kind this collection's theoretical paper describes: take capable people, install a deep shared framework, place them where they will find one another, and you have manufactured a body that can act. It is worth registering that the same mechanism which produced the Confucian literati and the founding presidents of eight African nations also produced this, because the theory's most uncomfortable claim is that the mould does not care what is poured into it.

Now the finding that the framework predicts and the record supplies. **The weapon did not reduce the pursuit of the Nizaris. It changed its form.**

This collection calls that the cost-and-credibility condition: a credibly enforced cost alters the *shape* of a pursuit, not its existence. Rulers did not stop trying to destroy Alamut. They stopped trying to destroy it by leading armies in person. They wore mail beneath their robes. They screened their households, and screened the screeners. They kept their intimates at a distance, which cost them the counsel that intimacy provides. Many of them — this is the part the legend omits — simply paid. Tribute, quiet accommodations, non-aggression understandings and outright subsidies were arranged repeatedly, and the Nizari state financed itself in part on the proceeds. And a number of rulers reached for the obvious alternative and hired the instrument themselves, which is the subject of Part VIII.

A weapon that makes your enemies pay you is a good weapon. It also converts you, over time, from a persecuted religious community into a service provider, and it teaches every court in the region that your continued existence is a permanent tax on their sleep.

Both of those consequences would arrive. Neither was designed.

PART VII

The Old Man of the Mountain

The Syrian branch is where the order met Europe, and it is where the legend was born.

Nizari missionaries had been working in Syria since the early twelfth century, with mixed and frequently disastrous results. From the 1130s they secured a group of castles in the Jabal Bahra, the coastal mountains between Hama and the sea, of which Masyaf became the chief. Syria in this period is the most fragmented political landscape in the medieval world: Sunni princes at Damascus and Aleppo, a Shia Fatimid rump in Egypt, four Crusader states along the coast, Turkish, Kurdish and Arab warlords in between, and no power capable of imposing order on any of it. It is, in other words, the ideal environment for a small party whose instrument works best where authority is personal and contested.

The man who exploited it was Rashid al-Din Sinan, born at Basra between about 1132 and 1135, educated at Alamut, and sent to Syria as chief *da'i* around 1162. He governed the Syrian Nizaris for some thirty years with substantial autonomy from Persia, and he is the historical original of the figure the Crusaders called *Vetulus de Montanis* — the Old Man of the Mountain. The title is a European coinage; the Arabic behind it, *shaykh al-jabal*, means the elder or chief of the mountain and carries no mystique in its own language.

Sinan's chief enemy was not the Crusaders. It was Saladin.

Salah al-Din — a Kurdish officer who had made himself master of Egypt by 1171, abolished the Fatimid caliphate there, and then spent a decade taking Muslim Syria before he ever fought the Franks seriously — was the single greatest threat the Syrian Nizaris faced, for the straightforward reason that he was the only man in a position to unify the region. A unified Sunni Syria has no room in it for a Shia enclave in the coastal mountains. The Nizaris understood this and tried twice to kill him, in 1175 and 1176; the second attempt reached him closely enough that he was wounded and saved by his armour.

In 1176 he besieged Masyaf, and then lifted the siege and came to terms.

The famous account of why — that he woke in his tent to find the lamps moved, a poisoned dagger, and hot cakes of a shape peculiar to the Nizaris pinned with a note threatening his life — is a wonderful story that appears in later sources and should be handled as tradition rather than as evidence. What is not in doubt is the outcome, and the outcome is the point. **Saladin, at the height of his power, with an army in front of the fortress, decided that reducing the Nizaris was not worth what it would cost him, and made an accommodation that held for the rest of his life.** From that point they were left alone, and Saladin was free to turn on the Crusader states, which he did to devastating effect at Hattin in 1187.

Read that as a transaction and the actual product of the whole enterprise becomes visible.

Saladin did not fear a Nizari army; there wasn't one. He did not fear losing a battle at Masyaf; he would have won it. What he could not accept was the *residual probability*, for the remainder of his life, that one of the men around him was not his. That is what the two attempts had demonstrated, and once demonstrated it could not be un-demonstrated by any subsequent security measure, because the whole difficulty is that you cannot verify the loyalty of the man verifying loyalty.

So the product was never the killing. **The product was uncertainty about the household** — and it was sold, not spent. Sinan's position in Syria for thirty years rested on the fact that every prince within reach preferred a truce with him to the permanent condition of not being sure about his own guards. Tribute was paid to the Nizaris by Christian and Muslim powers alike; at various points they also paid tribute themselves, to the Templars and Hospitallers, when the military orders were strong enough locally to collect it. It was a protection economy, and the Nizaris were on both sides of it.

The trouble with selling uncertainty is that the buyer cannot verify the goods, and the seller cannot control who is credited with what. Once every court in Syria believed the Nizaris could reach anyone, every unexplained death within reach of the coast became theirs by default, whether or not they had anything to do with it. A reputation is an asset that accrues without consent — and Part VIII is what that costs.

PART VIII

The Murder at Tyre

On 28 April 1192, Conrad of Montferrat — recently elected king of Jerusalem, though not yet crowned — was returning from dinner at the bishop's house in Tyre when he was approached by two men in the habit of monks. One handed him a letter. As he read it they stabbed him. One was killed at once; the other took sanctuary in a church, was taken, and under torture named the party who had commissioned the killing.

He named Richard I of England.

The accusation stuck to Richard for the rest of his life, contributed materially to his arrest and imprisonment in Germany on his way home, and has been argued over for eight hundred years. This study cannot settle it and will not pretend to. What it can do is lay out why the case is a superb specimen of how reputations do the work that evidence cannot, and there are five candidates.

Richard. He and Conrad had been rivals for control of the Third Crusade's politics, and Conrad had been negotiating separately with Saladin against Richard's interest. The captured assassin named him. Against it: Richard had just conceded, days earlier, accepting the barons' demand that Conrad be made king and shipping his own candidate, Guy of Lusignan, off to Cyprus as consolation. If Richard wanted Conrad dead, the moment for it was *before* that concession, not after. And the killers had been in Tyre for months, in position, which means the timing was chosen — by someone.

Henry of Champagne. Richard's nephew, who married Conrad's widow eight days after the murder and became ruler of the kingdom. Means and motive are both present, and he is the man who actually collected.

Guy of Lusignan. Displaced by Conrad. But he was resigned to Cyprus, had no support among the barons, left in May, and made no move to re-enter the succession once Conrad was gone.

Saladin. Conrad had slaughtered Muslim prisoners and was hated for it. But he was also in warm negotiation with Saladin at the time and was, from Saladin's position, the more tractable of the two Frankish leaders. Killing him removed a useful counterparty and unified the enemy.

Sinan, on his own account. And here the record supplies the least romantic and possibly the strongest motive of all. A ship belonging to the Nizaris had put in at Tyre and been seized. Sinan demanded its return. Conrad refused, and had the ship's captain killed. This is a trade dispute. It is entirely sufficient, and it makes the most consequential political murder of the Third Crusade the consequence of an argument about a cargo.

Then comes the detail that makes this episode worth a part of its own.

A letter survives, addressed from Sinan to Leopold V of Austria, taking responsibility for the assassination and explicitly clearing Richard of any part in it. It was produced at Richard's request, in 1193, while he was Leopold's prisoner. **It is generally held by modern historians to be a forgery**, composed after Sinan's death.

Set that beside the previous study in this collection. There, a document was forged to establish that an emperor had granted the west to a bishop, in order to cure a defect in a land title. Here, a document was forged to establish that a Syrian *da'i* had ordered a murder, in order to cure a defect in a king's alibi. In both cases the forger understood the evidentiary gap with precision and cut the document to fit it exactly. In both cases the forgery worked on its immediate audience. Forgery is not the signature of a conspiracy; it is a **technique of the period**, available to anyone with a scriptorium and a problem, and its presence tells you that someone had a problem rather than that someone had a plan.

The lasting consequence of the murder at Tyre had nothing to do with who ordered it. It is that this is the moment the Nizaris entered European consciousness, and they entered it in the worst possible form: as an unseen power that could reach a king in his own city, on the word of an old man in a mountain, for reasons no Frank could ascertain. Everything in Part XII grows from that afternoon.

PART IX

The Resurrection, and the Retraction

On 17 Ramadan 559, which is 8 August 1164, representatives of the Nizari communities were summoned to Alamut. A pulpit had been erected facing the wrong way, toward the west. Hasan II, the fourth lord of Alamut, delivered a sermon announcing that he brought new instructions from the imam of the time: the community had been brought to the *qiyama*, the Resurrection.

In standard Islamic eschatology the Resurrection is the end of time, when the dead are raised and judged. What was proclaimed at Alamut was that it had arrived *inside history*. The consequences drawn from it were radical to the point of vertigo. If the Resurrection is here, then the age of the sacred law is over: the law was a discipline for the period of concealment, and the period of concealment has ended. The outward observances were accordingly suspended, and the community was told to live in the truth the law had veiled. The fast of Ramadan was broken on the spot. Similar ceremonies were held at Mu'min-Abad in Quhistan on 18 October 1164 and at Masyaf in Syria.

Hasan II was stabbed to death at the castle of Lambsar in January 1166, about twenty months later, by his own brother-in-law. His son Nur al-Din Muhammad II succeeded him at seventeen, ruled for forty-four years — the longest tenure of any lord of Alamut — and spent them elaborating and systematising the doctrine his father had proclaimed, placing the living imam at its centre and producing a substantial body of philosophical writing.

Then Muhammad II died on 1 September 1210, and his son Jalal al-Din Hasan III did something for which this collection has no parallel.

He abolished the Resurrection. He repudiated the doctrine of his great-grandfather, reimposed the sacred law in its Sunni form, and invited jurists from Khurasan, Qazvin and Iraq to Alamut to instruct his followers. He publicly cursed his ancestors. He burned the books of Hasan-i Sabbah. He invited the visiting Sunni scholars into the library of Alamut and asked them to remove and destroy whatever they found objectionable. He sent his mother on the pilgrimage to Mecca. And in Rabi' I 608 — August 1211 — the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir formally acknowledged the new dispensation and issued a decree to that effect, after which Jalal al-Din was known as *naw musalman*, the New Muslim.

The recognition was not ceremonial. Ghurid attacks on the Nizaris of Quhistan ceased. In Syria, where the Nizaris were under Frankish pressure, the Ayyubids gave them assistance. In 1213 the Nizari imam personally led an army into Azerbaijan to fight alongside one of the caliph's principal allies against a rebellious lieutenant, and was rewarded with the towns of Abhar and Zanjan. The head of the order that had killed the caliph's vizier in 1092 was campaigning in the caliph's coalition in 1213.

He died on 1 November 1221. His son and successor reversed a good deal of it again.

Now: what is a framework supposed to do with that?

The first thing it should not do is reach for insincerity. The easy reading — that the *qiyama* was a device and the retraction a device, and that the imams believed neither — is available and this study declines it, for the reason given in this collection's Albanian volume. The method reads the position, not the heart. Whether Hasan II experienced the Resurrection as a revelation or as a policy is not recoverable from the sources and nothing in the analysis depends on it.

What the position shows is this.

The *qiyama* is what a movement does when it has been besieged into permanence. By 1164 the Nizaris had held their rocks for seventy years and had achieved precisely nothing beyond holding them. The Seljuk empire had not fallen. The hidden imam had not appeared in glory. The revolutionary programme had become a garrison. A movement in that condition faces a specific crisis — the promise has not arrived

and the fighting generation is dying — and the available solutions are few. One of them is to declare that the promise has arrived, and that it was of a different kind than was expected: not a political victory but a spiritual condition, available now, inside these walls. That is a reframe that converts a strategic stalemate into a fulfilled prophecy, and it is not cynical to observe that it is also the reframe that keeps the community together.

The retraction of 1210 is what a movement does when the outside world changes. Jalal al-Din inherited a position that was no longer the one his great-grandfather had designed for. The Seljuk empire was gone. Its successor, the Khwarazmian empire, was expanding fast. And far to the east, something the sources were beginning to report was moving out of Mongolia. A small state surrounded by enemies, whose entire external policy for a century had been deterrence-by-reputation, was about to need allies — and no one allies with a party that has declared the sacred law abolished. Rejoining the community of Islam bought recognition, ended two active wars, and secured an Abbasid alliance. It cost the doctrine.

Notice what this does to the standard picture of the order. The received image is of an unchanging fanatical sect. The record shows a doctrine reversed at the root, twice, inside three generations, in each case in the direction the external position required — and an imam who burned his own founder's books forty-five years before the Mongols burned the rest of the library.

And notice the direction of causation, because it is the framework's central claim in an unusually clean specimen. The doctrine did not drive the position. The position drove the doctrine, in both directions, and the same office that proclaimed the abolition of the law proclaimed its restoration when the ledger changed. If this is a conspiracy, it is one that cannot keep its own story straight for a century — which is exactly what position logic predicts, because there was never a story. There were men in a rock, reading their situation.

PART X

The Deterrent Becomes the Death Warrant

The central finding of this study is stated in this part, and it can be put in a sentence.

The reputation that kept the Nizari state alive for a hundred and sixty-six years is the specific reason it was marked for extermination rather than for tribute.

Every previous adversary had faced the same calculation and made the same decision. The Seljuks, the Khwarazmians, the Ayyubids, the Crusader states, the Zangids: each in turn worked out that reducing a scatter of self-provisioned rocks would cost more seasons than it was worth, that the man giving the order would be personally exposed for the duration, and that an accommodation was cheaper. The design was doing exactly what it had been designed to do. It made the Nizaris not worth the trouble.

The Mongols ran a different calculation, and the difference is worth stating precisely because it is where the design fails.

The Mongol state was not deterred by the personal exposure of its ruler, because its response to attempted regicide was institutional rather than personal. The Nizaris appear to have attempted, or to have been believed to have attempted, exactly the move that had worked on everyone else. In 1253 the Flemish friar William of Rubruck arrived at the Mongol capital of Karakorum and was struck by the security precautions there — imposed, he understood, in response to a report that some forty or more assassins had been dispatched to kill the Great Khan Möngke. Whether such a party was ever sent is not established and the report may be rumour. **It did not need to be true.** The threat was credited, and the Mongol reaction to a credited threat was not to make terms. It was to remove the source.

In 1252 Möngke assigned the conquest of western Asia to his brother Hülegü, with two named objectives at the top of the list: the Nizari state and the Abbasid caliphate. The advance guard under Kitbuqa began reducing fortresses in 1253. Hülegü himself did not arrive in Persia for more than two years, with an army of five tümens and something on the order of a thousand squads of Chinese, Khitan and Muslim siege engineers.

That last detail is the one that ends the story, and it deserves emphasis. Hasan-i Sabbah's design assumed a specific technological ceiling: that the reduction of a mountain fortress required starving it out, and that starving it out was slow, expensive and personally dangerous. The Mongols brought counterweight artillery and a professional siege corps recruited from the conquest of China. Against that, a rock is no longer a permanent asset. It is a schedule.

The campaign proper opened in Quhistan in the spring of 1256. By November, Hülegü was encamped before Maymun-Diz, where the imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah — who had succeeded on 1 December 1255, inheriting a war his father's policy had made — was holding out. After a bombardment lasting a few days he opened negotiations, and on 19 November 1256 he surrendered. He then did the thing that the design had never anticipated: he ordered his own garrisons to give up their fortresses and dismantle them, and most of them obeyed.

Alamut itself surrendered in December 1256. Its commander, Muqaddam al-Din, complied with the imam's order. The fortifications were demolished.

Two observations about the surrender.

The first is that the design's fatal defect was its centralisation. The whole apparatus had been constructed so that no single blow could destroy it — no capital, no field army, no centre of gravity. But it had a single point of command, because the doctrine of *ta'lim* required one. The imam's word was the operative authority in the entire structure; that was the argument on which the state was founded. It followed that the imam's word could also dissolve it. A movement that has spent a century and a half teaching that obedience

to the living guide is the condition of salvation cannot easily disobey the living guide when he tells it to open the gates. Hasan-i Sabbah's two great inventions, the scattered fortresses and the unitary teacher, were designed to reinforce each other, and at the end the second one cancelled the first.

The second is that the fanaticism was not there. One recent account of the fall puts it with some force: a movement that had once produced men happy to die in foreign courts was, by 1256, finding it hard to produce garrison commanders willing to die in their own castles. Whatever the *fida'i* had been, it had been a specific instrument of a specific period, not a permanent trait of a people.

Khurshah was treated courteously at first and sent east to seek Möngke's formal recognition of his submission. Möngke refused to receive him. On the return journey his Mongol escort killed him.

And then the extermination order was executed. Möngke directed a general massacre of the Nizaris. Khurshah's family, held at Qazvin, were killed. In Quhistan, some twelve thousand people were summoned to assemblies under promise of amnesty and slaughtered. Villages in Rudbar were systematically depopulated through 1257. The scholarly estimate for the whole campaign is on the order of a hundred thousand dead. Lambsar fell in 1257; Girdkuh held out, remarkably, until 1270; the Syrian castles passed to the Mamluk sultan Baybars around 1270.

Here, then, is the framework's signature in its harshest form.

The instrument was built to make the community too expensive to attack. It worked, for six generations, against every power that met it. And its success was cumulative and public and could not be withdrawn: by the thirteenth century the reputation of the Nizaris was the largest fact about them in every court from Cairo to Karakorum. When a power finally arrived that was both immune to the deterrent — because its succession did not depend on the survival of any one man — and possessed of the engineering to make rocks cheap, that reputation did not protect the community. **It selected it.** The Nizaris went to the top of the conquest list not despite the terror they had cultivated but because of it.

Hasan-i Sabbah, sitting in his room at Alamut in 1092 and deciding how a party with no soldiers might survive, could see the Seljuk army and could not see the far end of what he was making. Nobody in any position can. That is the whole of the claim.

PART XI

The Chronicler's Claim

The man who wrote the history of the fall was standing in the library when it burned.

Ata-Malik Juvayni was a Persian Sunni administrator from a family of officials, in Mongol service, who accompanied Hülegü's campaign and afterwards governed Baghdad. His *Tarikh-i Jahangusha*, the History of the World Conqueror, is a masterpiece and is our principal source for the Nizari state from the inside. He obtained Hülegü's permission to enter the library at Alamut before its destruction. He examined it, removed some Qurans, certain astronomical instruments and a few works he judged worth preserving, and had the remainder burned as the heretical writings of a damnable sect.

Among the things he read and quoted before burning was the *Sargudhasht-i Sayyidna* — "The Adventures of Our Master" — the partly autobiographical account of Hasan-i Sabbah's life. It does not survive. Essentially everything the modern world knows about the founder of this movement comes through the hands of a man in the service of the army that destroyed it, quoting a book he then set on fire.

This is worth pausing on as a general point about evidence, because it recurs everywhere in this collection. **When an institution is destroyed by its enemies, the enemies write the archive.** Not necessarily dishonestly — Juvayni is a serious historian, and his preservation of what he preserved is the reason we can write about this at all. But a hostile source selects. It reports what is discreditable in full and what is ordinary not at all; it explains motives from outside; and its judgments become, by default, the facts of the case, because there is nothing to set against them.

Juvayni's most consequential judgment was that the annihilation had been complete. He recorded the extinction of the sect, and Persian historiography followed him. So did European scholarship when it arrived in the field in the nineteenth century, working from the same Persian and Arabic sources. For something close to six centuries, the standard account of the Nizari Ismailis concluded in 1256.

It is not true.

Modern research — the recovery of Nizari manuscripts from communities in Central Asia, Syria and South Asia, and the work of scholars including Shafique Virani on continued Ismaili activity at Alamut and in the south Caspian after the conquest — has established that the community survived. It survived in the mountain valleys, in Quhistan, in Syria under Mamluk rule, and above all in the places the Mongol army did not go. The imamate continued in the line of Rukn al-Din Khurshah. The community reorganised in Persia around Anjudan from the fifteenth century, and the missionary tradition that had gone east into Sind produced, over centuries, a large community in western India: the Khojas.

The line is traceable to the present day, and it acquired, by an odd route, a modern legal existence.

In 1866 a group of dissident Khojas in Bombay sued the man they had ceased to acknowledge as their spiritual head — Hasan Ali Shah, the first Aga Khan, an Ismaili imam who had fled Qajar persecution in Persia and settled in India — arguing that the Khoja community had always been Sunni and owed him nothing. The case was heard in the High Court of Bombay by Sir Joseph Arnould. Proceedings ran twenty-five days and included the Aga Khan's own testimony. On 21 November 1866 Arnould gave judgment against the plaintiffs, holding that the Khojas were a community which had converted to and had throughout abided in the faith of the Shia Imami Ismailis, and which was bound by ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary imam.

A British colonial judge, applying English procedure in a property dispute, thereby produced the most authoritative modern statement of the continuity Juvayni had declared broken six hundred years earlier. It is a peculiar way for a religion to be certified, and it is a reminder that institutions acquire their documentation from whatever apparatus happens to be available.

The line has continued. Aga Khan III led the community for seventy-two years and was, among other things, president of the League of Nations Assembly. Aga Khan IV, the forty-ninth imam, succeeded in 1957 and built the Aga Khan Development Network, which by the time of his death on 4 February 2025 employed some eighty thousand people across education, health, culture and microfinance, principally in Asia and Africa. He was succeeded by his son as Aga Khan V, the fiftieth imam. The community numbers somewhere between twelve and fifteen million and lives in more than thirty-five countries.

The chronicler's claim of total annihilation has thus been running, uncorrected in most places, for longer than the state it described existed. That is not a conspiracy either. It is what happens when the only surviving witness has an interest in the verdict and no one checks his arithmetic for six hundred years.

PART XII

The Legend and Its Makers

There remains the question of the word, and it is the most consequential thing the order ever produced, which is inconvenient because they did not produce it.

Begin with what the Nizaris called themselves. They were *Nizaris* — the party of Nizar — and, more broadly, Ismailis. They did not use, and would not have recognised, the name the world knows them by.

The name comes from a Sunni slur. From the early twelfth century, hostile Arabic sources in Syria applied to them terms in the family of *hashishi* and *hashishiyya*. The scholarly consensus, following A. I. Silvestre de Sacy in the early nineteenth century and refined substantially since, is that these were terms of abuse rather than description — the connotation being low, disreputable, irreligious rabble, of the kind that would be found intoxicated. There is no contemporary evidence that the Nizaris used hashish, and there is a considerable body of evidence that they should not have: Hasan-i Sabbah enforced the sacred law with severity and is reported to have had a son executed for drinking wine.

Then the Crusaders arrived, heard the word from their Sunni neighbours, understood it as a name rather than an insult, and carried it home.

The legend was assembled in Europe across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries out of exactly the material one would predict: fragmentary encounters, the murder at Tyre, the reports of returning Crusaders, and the ordinary human requirement that an inexplicable phenomenon be given a mechanism. If men will walk into a mosque and kill a king knowing they will die for it, there must be a *cause*, and the cause supplied was drugs and a promise. It reached its finished form in Marco Polo, who assembled the existing tales and added his own contribution: the secret garden of paradise, with its palaces and its streams of wine, honey and milk, into which the Old Man's recruits were carried while drugged, so that on waking in the fortress they would believe paradise real and earn their return to it by dying at his command.

Marco Polo did not visit Alamut. It had been rubble for a generation by the time he passed through Persia. He was writing down a story he was told, and the story he was told was already the enemy's story.

By the fourteenth century the legend had general currency in Europe and the Latin East and was received as reliable description. And then it did the thing that this study finds most instructive: **it detached from the people entirely and became a word.** *Assassin* passed into Italian, French, English, Spanish and beyond as a common noun meaning a murderer, and specifically a murderer of the politically prominent. It appears in Dante. It is in every European language now. Several hundred million people use it every year, and effectively none of them are aware that they are repeating a thirteenth-century sectarian insult about a real community whose descendants are alive.

Farhad Daftary's *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (1994) is the demolition, and the demolition has been comprehensively accepted in the scholarship. It has had almost no effect on the currency of the legend, which has in fact expanded enormously in the last two decades through a video game franchise that has sold well over two hundred million copies.

Now the finding, and it is the one this study was written for.

Everything the Nizaris built with intention was destroyed. The fortresses were dismantled. The state was extinguished. The library was burned. The doctrine was reversed twice by its own custodians and then largely lost. The community survived, but as a scattered religious minority with no political power, which is precisely the condition Hasan-i Sabbah's whole apparatus had been constructed to escape.

The one thing that survived intact, and that has grown continuously for eight hundred years, and that is more widely known today than at any previous moment in its history, is **the reputation** — and the reputa-

tion was written by their enemies, out of a slur they did not choose, a mechanism they did not use, and a garden that did not exist.

That is an institution's logic in its purest form. The durable output of the enterprise is not merely something its makers did not intend; it is something they did not make. It was manufactured by the people trying to destroy them, out of the deterrent they had deliberately cultivated, and it outlived every asset on the balance sheet.

There is a bleak symmetry in it. The Nizaris invented a technique for making a small party's threat enormous in the minds of powerful men. It worked. It worked so well that the enlargement escaped their hands, brought a world empire down on them, and then went on working for eight centuries after there was no longer anyone to direct it.

PART XIII

The Ledger

Both columns, in ink.

In the column of the costs, and they must come first because they are the ones the legend obscures by exaggerating them into fantasy: the Nizari state killed people as policy. The victims were real and they include a vizier who was among the ablest administrators of the medieval world, a caliph, princes, generals, judges and jurists, together with the bystanders who died in the confusion of a public killing and the men taken and executed in reprisal. The order pioneered a technique — the public, unrecoverable, deliberately witnessed political murder — whose purpose was to spread fear as widely as possible, and which has been available to every party since that has found itself weak and willing. And the whole apparatus rested on persuading young men to trade their lives for an effect, which is the oldest transaction in politics and the one that has never once favoured the man making the trade.

Beside this belongs a cost the order did not choose: the Nizaris were massacred, on an estimate of some hundred thousand, in a campaign of deliberate extermination that included the slaughter of twelve thousand people in Quhistan lured to an assembly under a promise of amnesty. The moral ledger of this case runs in more than one direction and this study will not tidy it.

In the column of the achievements, which are real and which nobody expects: the Nizari state governed a scattered population for a hundred and sixty-six years and was, on the evidence of its adversaries' own descriptions, a serious civilisation. It maintained one of the great libraries of the Islamic world, whose destruction is a scholarly loss of the first rank. It practised an intellectual culture substantial enough that Nasir al-Din al-Tusi — the outstanding mathematician and astronomer of the thirteenth century — spent some three decades there and did significant work in it. In its final decades it sheltered scholars fleeing the Mongol devastation of Khurasan and gave them access to its books. It irrigated its valleys and fed its people. It produced a theological literature that modern scholarship, having finally read it in the original rather than in refutation, treats as a serious contribution. And the community that survived the annihilation it was reported not to have survived now operates one of the larger private development networks in the world.

The case resolves, as this project's cases tend to, against both easy pictures and into the harder one between them.

It was a conspiracy, and the conspiracy theory is still wrong. This is the sharpest thing this case has to offer, and it is why it was worth doing. Unlike every other institution in this collection, the Nizari order genuinely was a secret society with an oath, a graded initiation, covert agents in enemy cities, and a policy of political murder. The paranoid description of them was closer to the truth than the innocent one. And it explains almost nothing about what actually happened to them — because a conspiracy is a *method*, not an engine. It tells you how a decision was executed. It cannot tell you why the doctrine was reversed twice inside three generations, or why the deterrent that saved them selected them for destruction, or why the only durable product of the whole enterprise was written by the other side. For those you need positions, and the positions supply them without remainder.

It was not an accident. Every element was chosen by a man who could have explained his reasons. The infiltration rather than the assault, the irrigated valley, the scattered rocks, the argument from the teacher, the daylight and the mosque and the killer who did not run, the roll kept at Alamut, the terms made with Saladin: each is a deliberate solution by an identifiable person to a problem he could see.

It was an architect's hour, and then another — 1090, 1092, 1094, 1164, 1176, 1192, 1210, 1256 — each a bounded episode in which real people solved a pressing problem with the materials to hand, skewed

the settlement toward their own position, and then died and handed the result to a structure that carried it forward on a logic none of them chose.

And the reversals, set out plainly, because they are what the framework predicts and what this record supplies in unusual abundance:

The **weapon designed to make attack too expensive** made extermination the only acceptable policy for the one power that could afford it.

The **doctrine of the single authoritative teacher**, which held a dispersed movement together for a hundred and sixty-six years, is the reason that when one man said surrender, the whole structure opened its gates in a season.

The **imam who abolished the sacred law** in 1164 was answered by the imam who abolished the abolition in 1210, cursed his ancestors, and burned the founder's books forty-five years before the Mongols burned everything else.

The **chronicler who destroyed the library** is the reason we can write the history at all, and the reason the history was wrong for six hundred years.

And the **name** — the one asset that survived every siege — was a slur invented by their enemies, elaborated by strangers who never saw the place, and is now spoken daily, worldwide, by people who have no idea it refers to anybody.

The most durable thing in this story is not a man, and not a fortress, and not even the plot, which was real. It is a rumour: manufactured by the enemies of a hunted minority out of the fear that minority had deliberately cultivated for its own protection, and running still — eight hundred years after the last of its subjects was killed on a road in Persia by an escort that had been ordered not to bring him home.

Held, like everything in this project, as tested, not revealed.

A Note on Sources

This is a work of synthesis, and every quotation and figure has been verified to a published source; none is invented. The condition of the evidence for this case requires a preliminary statement.

On the sources generally. The Nizari archives of the Alamut period were destroyed in 1256. The principal narrative sources are therefore hostile: Ata-Malik Juvayni's *Tarikh-i Jahangusha* (History of the World Conqueror), written by a Sunni official in Mongol service who accompanied the campaign; Rashid al-Din Fadlallah's *Jami' al-Tawarikh*; and Abu'l-Qasim Kashani. Juvayni is the direct or indirect origin of most of what is known about Hasan-i Sabbah, including the fragments of the *Sargudhasht-i Sayyidna* which he read at Alamut before the library was burned. Fragments of Hasan's doctrinal treatise, the *Chahar Fasl / al-Fusul al-arba'a*, survive through al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) and the Persian historians. The modern reconstruction rests on manuscripts recovered from surviving Nizari communities and on the scholarship assembled principally at the Institute of Ismaili Studies; the standard synthesis is Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 2nd ed. 2007), supplemented by his articles in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (1967) remains widely read and is treated here as superseded on several points by later work. Readers should understand that this study, like all others in the field, is written substantially from the testimony of the prosecution.

On the landscape and the origins. The Seljuk conquest, the vizierate of Nizam al-Mulk, the Nizamiyya madrasas and al-Ghazali's appointment to the Baghdad chair in 1091 follow the standard histories of the period. The Fatimid caliphate, the Ismaili *da'wa* and its structure follow Daftary and the Institute of Ismaili Studies material. The succession crisis of 1094 — the death of al-Mustansir, the vizier al-Afdal's elevation of al-Musta'li over the designated Nizar, Nizar's revolt and death around 1095, and Hasan-i Sabbah's consequent break with Cairo — follows Daftary and the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article on Hasan Sabbah.

On Hasan-i Sabbah and Alamut. Birth at Qom around 1050 into a Twelver family; conversion at seventeen; the Cairo period around 1078–1081; the seizure of Alamut in 483 AH/1090 CE by infiltration rather than assault, the sparing of the previous holder Mahdi and the payment of three thousand gold dinars; the improvement of irrigation and cultivation to make the fortress self-sufficient; the establishment of the library; the subsequent capture of Lamasar, Girdkuh and strongholds in Quhistan and Arrajan; and his death on 12 June 1124 — follow the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* and Institute of Ismaili Studies articles on Hasan Sabbah and the standard scholarship. The tradition that he left his quarters twice in his years at Alamut, and the reports concerning the execution of his sons, come through the later Persian historians and are flagged here as tradition rather than as documented fact.

On the doctrine of *ta'lim*. The four propositions — the insufficiency of reason, the necessity of a truthful teacher (*mu'allim-i sadiq*), the impossibility of selecting him by reason, and his identification with the imam of the time — follow the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* account and the fragments preserved by al-Shahrastani. The designation of the Persian Nizaris as *Ta'limiyya*, and the description of the movement by outsiders as the "new preaching" (*al-da'wa al-jadida*) as against the "old preaching" of Fatimid Ismailism, follow the same sources. The commissioning of al-Ghazali by the caliph al-Mustazhir in 1094 to refute the

Ismailis, and the resulting *Fada'ih al-Batiniyya* (the *Mustazhiri*), follow the standard Ghazali scholarship and the recent treatment in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 142:1 (2022) of al-Ghazali as a witness to the *ta'lim* doctrine.

On the method. The killing of Nizam al-Mulk in Ramadan 485 AH/October 1092 by a *fida'i* in the dress of a Sufi, the death of Malikshah weeks later, and the collapse of the Seljuk expeditions against Rudbar and Quhistan follow the Institute of Ismaili Studies account and the standard histories; the cause of Malikshah's death is disputed in the sources and is flagged as such. The graded structure of *fida'i*, *rafiq* and *da'i* follows the standard reference literature. The roll of assassinations kept at Alamut is known through Juvayni. The characterisation of the killings as public, by dagger, frequently in mosques, with the killer typically not attempting escape, follows the standard accounts; the interpretation of that pattern as deterrence design rather than fanaticism is this study's own analytical claim, and rests on the concept of common knowledge developed by Michael Chwe in *Rational Ritual* (2001), treated elsewhere in this collection.

On Syria and Sinan. Rashid al-Din Sinan's birth at Basra between 1132 and 1135, his education at Alamut, his despatch to Syria and his tenure as chief *da'i* from about 1162 to his death in 1192 or 1193 follow the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* and the standard treatments. The two attempts on Saladin in 1175 and 1176, the siege of Masyaf and its abandonment, and the subsequent accommodation follow the same literature; **the celebrated account of the dagger, the note and the cakes left in Saladin's tent appears in later sources and is flagged here as tradition, not evidence.** The payment of tribute in both directions, including Nizari payments to the Templars and Hospitallers, follows the standard scholarship on the Syrian Nizaris.

On the murder of Conrad of Montferrat. The killing at Tyre on 28 April 1192 by two men in monastic habit; the survival and interrogation of one of them and his naming of Richard I; the seizure of a Nizari ship at Tyre, Conrad's refusal to return it and the killing of its captain; Henry of Champagne's marriage to Conrad's widow eight days later; and the state of the competing cases — follow the standard scholarship on the Third Crusade, including the argument of Patrick A. Williams and the recent reviews of the evidence. This study reports the question as unresolved and does not adjudicate it. **The letter from Sinan to Leopold V of Austria exculpating Richard is generally held by modern historians to be a forgery composed after Sinan's death**, and is so treated here.

On the *qiyama* and its retraction. The declaration at Alamut on 17 Ramadan 559 AH/8 August 1164 by Hasan II (*'ala dhikrihi'l-salam*), the parallel ceremonies at Mu'min-Abad on 28 Dhu'l-qa'da 559 AH/18 October 1164 and at Masyaf, and Hasan II's murder at Lambsar in January 1166 by his brother-in-law Hasan Namwar, follow the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* and Institute of Ismaili Studies articles on Hasan II. The forty-four-year reign of Nur al-Din Muhammad II and his elaboration of the doctrine follow the same sources. The reversal by Jalal al-Din Hasan III from 1210 — the repudiation of the *qiyama*, the adoption of Sunni observance, the cursing of his ancestors and the burning of Hasan-i Sabbah's books, the invitation to Sunni jurists to inspect and purge the Alamut library, the despatch of his mother on the pilgrimage, the caliph al-Nasir's acknowledgment in Rabi' I 608/August 1211 and the title *naw musalman*, the cessation of Ghurid attacks and the Ayyubid assistance in Syria, and the 1213 campaign in Azerbaijan rewarded with Abhar and Zanjan — follow the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article on Jalal al-Din Hasan III and Daftary.

On the Mongol campaign. Möngke's assignment of the western conquest to Hülegü in 1252 with the Nizari state and the Abbasid caliphate as priority objectives; Kitbuqa's advance operations from 1253;

William of Rubruck's observation at Karakorum in 1253 of security precautions attributed to a report of more than forty assassins despatched against Möngke; the composition of Hülegü's force and its Chinese, Khitan and Muslim siege corps; the reduction of Quhistan from April 1256; the siege of Maymun-Diz and Rukn al-Din Khurshah's surrender on 19 November 1256; his order to his garrisons to surrender and dismantle; the capitulation of Alamut in December 1256 under its commander Muqaddam al-Din; the fall of Lambsar in 1257, Girdkuh in 1270 and the Syrian castles to Baybars around 1270; Khurshah's despatch east, Möngke's refusal to receive him and his killing on the return journey; and the general massacre, including the killing of Khurshah's relatives at Qazvin and the slaughter of some twelve thousand in Quhistan lured to assemblies, with total estimates on the order of a hundred thousand — follow Daftary, the standard accounts of the campaign, and Juvayni. The residence of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi at the Nizari fortresses for roughly three decades, his conversion during that period as described in his *Sayr wa Suluk*, and his subsequent service to Hülegü, follow the standard scholarship on al-Tusi.

On the survival and the modern community. Juvayni's account of the library and its burning, and his report of the complete extinction of the community, are in the *Tarikh-i Jahangusha*. The evidence for continued Nizari activity at Alamut and in the south Caspian region after the conquest follows Shafique N. Virani, "The Eagle Returns," and his related work, together with Daftary. The Anjudan revival, the Khoja communities of western India, and the migration of Hasan Ali Shah, the first Aga Khan, to India follow the same literature. The Aga Khan Case was decided in the High Court of Bombay by Sir Joseph Arnould on 21 November 1866, after proceedings of twenty-five days, holding the Khojas to be a community that had converted to and abided in the faith of the Shia Imami Ismailis and was bound by spiritual allegiance to the hereditary imam. The death of Aga Khan IV, the forty-ninth imam, on 4 February 2025, and the succession of his son as Aga Khan V, the fiftieth imam, follow the announcements of the Ismaili Imamat and the contemporary press reporting; the community is given by the Imamat as numbering approximately twelve to fifteen million in more than thirty-five countries.

On the legend. The origin of *hashishi* and *hashishiyya* as terms of abuse in twelfth-century Syrian Sunni sources rather than as descriptions of drug use; the absence of contemporary evidence for hashish use among the Nizaris; the transmission of the term to the Crusaders and its passage into the European languages as a common noun; the assembly of the legend across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; Marco Polo's synthesis and his addition of the secret garden of paradise; and the establishment of the etymology by A. I. Silvestre de Sacy in the early nineteenth century — follow Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (I.B. Tauris, 1994), and the Institute of Ismaili Studies material derived from it. The persistence of the trope in modern popular culture follows Shafique N. Virani, "An Old Man, a Garden, and an Assembly of Assassins: Legends and Realities of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims."

On the framework. The concepts of *position*, the *field of the visible*, *convergence*, the *architect's hour*, the *institution's logic* and the *cost-and-credibility condition* belong to the Patterns of Power project of which this paper is part and are developed across its studies, in particular *Position Logic* and *Against the Historian's Reflex*. The reading of a graded formative organisation as a machine for manufacturing a coordinating body follows this collection's theoretical paper, *The Composable Class*. The pattern of an institution relocating the ground of its standing rather than surrendering the standing is developed in *The Last Roman Office*, whose treatment of the Petrine claim is the direct comparison drawn in Part V; the refusal to adjudicate a ruler's sincerity where the record cannot support it follows the method set out in *The Siege He Built Himself*. Where this study's claims err, they should err visibly, in a form the cited scholarship can correct.

Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, not revealed.